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CONSENSUS IN RUSSIA

The Soviet Union has reached the stage where it does not much matter who succeeds Brezhnev. The future will be a continuation of the present.

By Edward Crankshaw

Leonid Brezhnev will be 70 next year, and it is widely believed throughout the Soviet empire that he will announce his own retirement at the 25th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party to be held in Moscow in February.

This seems quite likely. For a long time he has been a sick man, *though nobody outside* the innermost circle of comrades knows for certain what is wrong. More than once during the past year he has seemed to be on the point of abdicating. He hung on, by all accounts, because he wanted the 25th Party Congress to be the crown and climax of his career. He was to appear as the man who had brought peace and stability to Russia and the world through his policy of détente. At the same time, the leading role of the Soviet party in the world Communist movement was to be formally acclaimed by a meeting of European Communist Parties on the eve of the great Congress.

Things have gone a little sour for him. The fraternal parties outside the Soviet bloc are no longer prepared to assemble on command and endorse any program Moscow cares to put forward. They refuse to be bullied or maneuvered into pronouncing anathema on Peking. The Italian comrades, with their political subtlety bred in the bone, regard with extreme distaste the clumsy intrigues that pass in Moscow for finessing. Marshal Tito is at last taking public exception to Moscow's attempts to establish a pro-Soviet opposition to the Belgrade Government. And so on. If the European parties do agree to meet before the Congress, it will be to argue with Mr. Brezhnev behind closed doors, not to bow down to him in public.

As for détente, one of the main reasons for Brezhnev's unrelenting pursuit of this goal was to obtain various agreements with the West without giving much away. The symbolic act, of course, was the so-called European Security Conference at Helsinki last summer, which could be presented to the simple-minded as Moscow's grand peace initiative, carried out in the teeth of cold warriors all over the world. It was badly timed. Brezhnev should have fixed it so that it fell just before the 25th Congress. But the interval was long enough to allow all sorts of things to happen that showed it up as the fraud it was. Western statesmen—first the President of France, then the President of West Germany—have been at pains rather belatedly to inform Brezhnev publicly and in Moscow that détente is indivisible and that there is a limit to the tolerance of Western nations in the face of hostile plotting by a supposedly friendly power.

The Western press has also done a good job in repeatedly reminding Brezhnev of certain Helsinki promises to do with human rights and freedom of movement, etc., which he never had the faintest intention of keeping and which he had hoped would be cravenly forgotten. The great grain agreement has been signed between America and Russia, but Brezhnev has had to submit to the humiliation (the depth of which is not understood by many in America) of formally admitting that the Soviet Union will be short of basic foodstuffs for at least another five years.

And now it is clear that because of fresh delays in the SALT talks, Brezhnev will not get to America until next year. This visit was also to have been a personal triumph. President Ford did his level best to give Brezhnev at least one prize by sacking Mr. Schlesinger, but Dr. Kissinger spoiled the effect almost at once by slamming the SALT ball into the Russian court and telling Moscow that it could pick it up or leave it.

Certainly there will be voices in Russia expressing disgruntlement with the very idea of détente. But I do not think they will cut much ice. The Soviet Union has little choice in the matter. To develop as a modern power, she is forced to seek accommodation with the West, and most responsible Russians know it. Capitalism may be in disarray, but it still, miraculously, works better than Russian collectivism.

The idea that if and when Brezhnev goes, the so-called "hard liners" will take over seems to me unjustified. Obviously all Soviet Governments close ranks and look fierce when change of any kind is forced upon them. But I have never been able to understand why that extremely tough customer Brezhnev has come to be regarded as a pattern of moderation—the implication being that it will be a sad day for the West when he goes.

Where is the evidence to support this notion? And what, anyway, does the concept of moderation mean when applied to the Soviet leadership?

It seems to me that Brezhnev very accurately represents a strong consensus position, and that is why he is where he is. Further, this consensus is a relatively permanent feature, forced on the Soviet leadership by the facts of life. For the Soviet Union has reached the stage when it does not much matter who holds the reins: The sheer pressure of events, of geopolitics, economics, military technology and internal social forces dictates the general policy line, as it does in other countries not engaged in a revolutionary upheaval. The future will be a continuation of the present.

Let me say at once that I do not imagine that all his colleagues, shadowy figures as most of them are, see eye to eye with Brezhnev all along the line. There can *(Continued on Page 94)*

Edward Crankshaw is a British writer widely known for his books on the U.S.S.R.

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